

Tories in Manchester

# 'I am not ceding any ground to Jeremy Corbyn. I will fight the next election'

**Conservative Party Conference**
**Interview**

By Ben Riley-Smith

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In an exclusive interview with *The Sunday Telegraph*, the Prime Minister sets out her stall for Britain's future

**T**heresa May's second conference as Tory leader was meant to be a celebration - a moment for cheers from the party faithful after routing Jeremy Corbyn at the ballot box. Instead, the former Member heads to Manchester with her Tory majority, dependent on another party to stay in power and dogged by leadership speculation.

Four months after the snap election that changed everything, the Prime Minister has begun to identify what went wrong.

In an exclusive interview with *The Sunday Telegraph*, Mrs May criticises her campaign and vows to win back the trust of Tory activists who spent days knocking on doors last June.

She has an uncompromising message for Conservative rebels on manoeuvres in the Westminster shadows - "I'm here to stay."

**Election mistakes**

Looking back on a tumultuous election from her office in Number 10, the Mrs May thinks she knows where things went awry.

It goes back to the first public words she said as Prime Minister when she spoke to the nation on the steps of Downing Street last July. Pledging to tackle "burning injustice" in Britain, Mrs May made clear that families left behind by globalisation.

"I know you're working around the clock. I know you're doing your best, and I know that sometimes life can be a struggle," she said, down the camera. "We will do everything we can to give you more control over your lives."

It was a clarion call for change, based on the analysis that the Brexit vote was won by the Labour Party in Brussels but a cry of frustration.

Yet come the election, that message - the bedrock of her early premiership - was replaced with a pitch around "strong and stable" leadership and "strengthening my hand" for Brexit.

It is this that Mrs May singles out when asked about campaign mistakes.

"The overall thing I would say is that we did not do enough to explain what was set out here in Downing Street in July 2016," she says.

"That mission, that message, didn't

get across during the election. I think that is one of the key issues that came out of the campaign."

Who is to blame is less clear - though indicators point to campaign HQ constraining her election messages. The result was Mr Corbyn was not a mistake Mrs May intends to make again, as she has done again of her Downing Street speech hung in Number 10 - one outside her office, another where visitors wait - and this week's conference announcements will spin out of the text.

**Mea Culpa**

Manchester's gathering is the first time Mrs May can address the Tory faithful personally after the election - a moment demanding empathy as well as resolve.

Bad blood was easy to find over the summer, with activists frustrated at pounding the pavements for an unnecessary election that returned 22 fewer Tory seats.

And for the message to them, Mrs May offers an apology of sorts, not least to colleagues who lost their seats. "I recognise there were so many of our activists up and down the country - I saw them when I was going around campaigning - who were out there working really hard for a good result."

"You look at results in some individual seats where people got votes of trust that they've never had before. [But] sometimes there were candidates who still didn't quite get the seat, sometimes it was Members of Parliament who lost their seats."

"I'm sorry that we lost a lot of good colleagues during the election. It wasn't the result I wanted, I hoped for."

It is clear that Mrs May - a Tory activist who for more than 40 years rose up the traditional way through council politics - acutely feels her party's pain.

"I first started stuffing envelopes for the party in my teens," she says. "I recognise the work that goes into any election campaign."

"Can she win back their trust?" "Yes," she says without hesitation. "What I see in the party is a real determination for the Government to get on with the job."

**Comrade Corbyn**

Part of that job is taking on the "21st century socialism" being touted by Mr Corbyn, the Labour leader.

The 68-year-old is riding high after unexpectedly picking up the seats at the election thanks to a surge of young voters. Three times more 18-to-24-year-olds backed him than Mrs May.

The Prime Minister, who herself turns 61 today, sees their two parties locked in an ideological battle over the importance of free markets.

"I didn't see much of the Labour

party conference but I've obviously heard the messages they were giving. You are going to see quite a contrast this week," she says.

"It's a contrast between a Labour Party that just keeps on promising people without knowing how they're going to pay for everything... and a Conservative Party that understands the need for a balanced approach to our economy."

With that as the backdrop, the Prime Minister today outlines her pitch to win back younger voters: freezing tuition fees, raising the wage level for paying back student loans and ordering a wider review of the system, plus £10bn of help to get people on the housing ladder.

The move comes with political risk. Will Mrs May not be accused of pinching Labour's clothes, given a promise to scrap tuition fees was at the heart of their election manifesto?

She disagrees: "Let's look at what Labour did. They made a lot of promises to students in the election, some of which they rode back on after the election. They gave the impression they were going to abolish debt, then made it clear that wasn't what they were going to be doing."

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up the importance of protecting British business but pushed on whether the country could "diverge" from the EU before 2021 - meaning adopting different rules and regulations from Brussels in some areas - she says "yes".

Mrs May dismisses the argument.

"I think probably if you look back in the records of newspapers you'll see that cabinet ministers giving different views on Brexit have happened in the last year and a half, that it's actually happened before," she says. "What matters is what the government comes together and does.

"That's what matters to the voters."

The Prime Minister was the first foreign leader to visit the American President, flying to Washington DC with the offer of a state visit within days of his inauguration.

The trip was born from a strategic decision by her closest aides - that Mr Trump valued loyalty and building a rapport with him was the best way to influence him.

But despite this week's news of the United States slapping sanctions on Bombardier, a Canadian firm that employs more than 4,000 people in Northern Ireland, not reveal our powerlessness?

"No," says Mrs May. "Obviously the issue of Bombardier is one I've raised with President Trump on a number of occasions. I didn't let him in on the inside story, I let him in on the margins of the UN General Assembly. But this is a preliminary judgment - that's what comes out from the Department of Commerce."

The Prime Minister also points to Nato - where she elicited a "100 per cent" commitment from Mr Trump on the vision and the future partnership that we had in this week's outline in my Florence speech."

Is any Cabinet minister unsackable? There is silence for a full four seconds. "Now that's the sort of question," Mrs May begins, before trailing off. "Actually I think I've answered that question before," she adds. "She has, been in July. The answer was no."

For critics, this is a crucial point. The Prime Minister is so politically weakened by her handling of Brexit that's what matters to the public: you delivering on the issues that they think are of real importance to them?"

Mrs May's message is similarly uncompromising to the few dozen Tory MPs who have asked her to step aside in March 2019 once Britain is formally out of the EU.

She adds to America's stance that "nothing is off the table" but makes clear that for Britain the focus is "continuing to put diplomatic international pressure" on Kim Jong-un and his rogue state.

And with that, the interview comes to a close. There is one final task - to photograph. Dressed in Tory blue and posing by a grand Downing Street door, Mrs May's message to colleagues and conference seems clear - "I'm going nowhere."

**Donald Trump**

If she is to make it to the 2022 vote and steer Britain's path beyond the EU, Mrs May's relationship with Donald Trump will be crucial.

**Conference agenda**
**Raising the Ruth**

One of the first speakers when the conference gets underway today will be Ruth Davidson, the Scottish Conservative leader, who is in with Boris Johnson for Tory leader. She is due to address the party on "strengthening our citizens" on Sunday afternoon.

**Corbyn jokes are on sale**

The day at 10am, focusing on how to "fight injustices". Later, David Davis, the Brexit Secretary, will discuss securing the best EU exit deal followed by the Conservative Party to the importance of free markets and the resurgence of the Conservative Party.

**Big hitters**

Tomorrow, Philip Hammond, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, will explain how he plans to "build a strong economy", but the highlights of the week are expected to be Theresa May's speech on Wednesday.

**Prime time**

The grand finale will see Theresa May take centre stage and close the conference on Wednesday in a speech entitled "Building a country that works for everyone".

majority, they argue, that she cannot afford to sack the big Cabinet names - and therefore collective responsibility is undermined as they appear free to voice their opinions. Mrs May dismisses the argument.

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